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(Sacca) Avijjā Sutta

The (Truth) Discourse on Ignorance | S 56.17

Theme: The greatest ignorance is that of the 4 noble truths

Translated by Piya Tan ©2018

1 Sutta significance

1.1 The (Sacca) Avijjā Sutta (S 56.17) is a short text on the definition of **ignorance** (*avijjā*), that is, the “not-knowing of the 4 noble truths,” and the 4 truths are then laid out in full. When we are ignorant of these 4 truths, we are said to be “overwhelmed by ignorance” (*avijjā,gata*).

1.2 THE ROOT OF OUR ACTIONS

1.2.1 Mental fetter. When we are still unawakened, **ignorance** underlies all our actions—through body, speech and mind. It insidiously feeds all other defilements and itself, too. Hence, it is the last of the 10 fetters (*dasa saṃyojana*) that bind us to samsara, the cycle of lives and deaths.

We are thus conditioned, like Sisyphus,¹ to keep pushing the karmic rock up to the peak of our lives; then, it rolls down again, and we chase after it, imagining it to be such fun. When it reaches the valley bottom and we catch up with it, we even deem it as our greatest achievement.

1.2.2 Mental perversion. As long as we do not understand **the nature of suffering**, we actually think that it is *enjoyable*. This is a perceptive pervasion (*saññā,vipallāsa*): that is, regarding what is suffering as being not so. Ignorance works with **craving**: not knowing true reality, we see ourself as lacking what we see outside of us or in others. We see things as worth *having* and measure people thinking that their state or status as worth *being*. Blind ignorance carrying lame craving on his shoulders, who dictates ignorance where to go and what to do.²

1.2.3 Latent tendency

1.2.3.1 Psychologically, ignorance functions deep in our “**unconscious**” (the functions of the mind we are unaware of, working on their own, as it were) as a **latent tendency** (*anusaya*). We are *not* always conscious of our actions.³ When our conscious mind intends (*ceteti*) and plans (*pakappeti*), this feeds our karmic or existential consciousness,⁴ which means we will be reborn in due course. However, even when we *neither* intend *nor* plan, we are still reborn—this is on account of the momentum of our latent tendencies.

¹ On *Sisyphus*, see SD 23.3 (1); SD 48.3 (1.2.2.2); SD 49.2 (4.3.2.1); SD 50.8 (1.2.1.7; 2.3.2.6).

² See **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49), SD 16.11.

³ See SD 31.3 (1.1).

⁴ “**Existential consciousness**” is a modern generic term for what is commonly known in the texts as “being-to-be-born” or *gandharva* (*gandhabba*) (M 1:266, 2:157; *tatrūpagata,satto*, “the being that has arrived there,” MA 2:310), and in Comys as “rebirth consciousness” (*paṭisandhi,citta*, DA 2:430; MA 4:174; SA 1:184, 2:31), and “life-continuum” (*bhavaṅga*, DA 1:194, 2:594; MA 1:262, 2:77, 229, 352, 366; SA 1:184, 224, 2:358, 3:4, 54, 97, 3:191). In contrast, there is “**cognitive consciousness**,” which is operative during life itself, ie, in sense-experiencing. See **Nagara S** (S 12.65), SD 14.2 (2) & **Vīññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (6).

1.2.3.2 The Cetanā Sutta 1 (S 12.38) explains this in a very interesting way, thus:

(1) THE CONSCIOUS ARISING OF SUFFERING

2 ⁵Bhikshus, what one intends,⁶ and what one plans,⁷ and what lies latent⁸—this is a mental basis⁹ for the support [establishing] for consciousness.¹⁰

When there is a mental basis [condition], consciousness is established.¹¹

¹²When that consciousness is established and grows therein,¹³ there is **further [continued] arising of rebirth**.¹⁴

When there is the further arising of rebirth, there further arise birth,¹⁵ decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain [displeasure], and despair.

Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.

(2) THE UNCONSCIOUS ARISING OF SUFFERING

3 ¹⁶If, bhikshus, one does not intend, and one does not plan, but if one still has latent tendencies (*anuseti*)¹⁷—this is a mental basis (*ārammaṇa*) that supports consciousness.

⁵ *Yañ ca kho bhikkhave ceteti, yañ ca pakappeti, yañ ca anuseti, ārammaṇam etaṃ hoti viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā. Ārammaṇe sati patiṭṭhitā viññāṇassa hoti.* According to Bodhi, here “*sañkhārā* are referred to elliptically by the expressions *yañ ceteti*, ‘what one wills,’ and *yañ pakappeti*, ‘what one plans’ (*pakappeti* is a rare term, apparently synonymous with *ceteti*). The expression *yañ anuseti*, ‘what lies latent within,’ points to the *anusaya*, the latent tendencies, which other texts tell us include the latent tendency of ignorance (*avijjānusaya*) and the latent tendency of lust or craving (*rāgānusaya*) [M 1:190 f, 1:303 etc].” (1998:21, digital ed). See SD 31.3 (2.1).

⁶ “**One intends**” (*ceteti*) here includes all wholesome and unwholesome volition of the 3 planes. See SA 31.3 (2.1) above.

⁷ “**One plans**” (*pakappeti*), the mental fabrications of craving and views (*taṇhā, ditṭhi, kappā*) in the 8 cittas (mind-moments) accompanied by greed. [SAP]: The fabrications of views occur only in the 4 cittas associated with views.] See SD 31.3 (2.1).

⁸ “**What lies latent**” (*anuseti*), ie, one habitually does something whether out of unwholesome motivation or wholesome motivation, or even without intention. See SD 7.6a (2.1).

⁹ *Yañ ca kho bhikkhave ceteti, yañ ca pakappeti, yañ ca anuseti, ārammaṇam etaṃ hoti viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā. Ārammaṇe sati patiṭṭhitā viññāṇassa hoti.* “**This is a mental basis**” (*ārammaṇam etaṃ hoti*). These various states such as volition become a condition; for here the word *ārammaṇa* is intended as condition (*paccaya*) [that is, here *ārammaṇa* does *not* signify an object of consciousness, the usual meaning in the Abhidhamma].

¹⁰ “**For the support for consciousness**” (*viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā*), that is, for the purpose of maintaining the karmic consciousness. When there is this condition, “**there is a support for consciousness**” (*patiṭṭhā viññāṇassa hoti*), that is, for the establishing of that karmic consciousness. [SAP]: It has a capacity to yield fruit in one’s mental continuum.]

¹¹ *Ārammaṇe sati patiṭṭhitā viññāṇassa hoti*, lit “when there is a mental basis, there is the establishing of consciousness.” Here, *ārammaṇa* has an early non-technical sense, meaning simply “condition,” and as Bodhi takes pain to state, “does *not* signify an object of consciousness, the usual meaning in Abhidhamma” (S:B 758 n112). For an expl of this “condition,” see **Madhu, piṇḍika S** (M 18,16/1:111 f), SD 6.14.

¹² *Tasmim̐ patiṭṭhite viññāṇe virūlhe āyatim̐ punabbhavābhiniḥḥati hoti.*

¹³ “**When that consciousness has a support and grows**” (*tasmim̐ patiṭṭhite viññāṇe...virūlhe*). When, having driven karma on (*kammaṃ javāpetvā*), it has grown and produced roots, through its ability to cause rebirth; hence, “**there is further arising of rebirth**,” ie, production consisting in renewed existence. (SA 2:71)

¹⁴ *Punabbhavābhiniḥḥati*. Here *punabbhava* (lit “renewed existence”) is the Sutta term for “rebirth,” which in later literature is called *paṭisandhi* (see BDict). See **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43.17/1:294). It is possible to render this phrase, taking *punabbhavābhiniḥḥati* as a dvandva, as “renewed existence and arising in the future” (BDict). Here I have taken it in a general sense of the continuance of existence within the present life and indefinitely into future ones. Sometimes *abhiniḥḥati* by itself means “rebirth” (A 6.61/3:399-402, 10.65/5:120 f).

¹⁵ “Birth” (*jāti*), omitted in PTS ed.

When there is a mental basis, there is a support for consciousness.

When consciousness has a support and grows, there is **further [continued] arising of re-birth.**

When there is the further arising of rebirth, there further arise birth, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair.

Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.¹⁸ (S 12.38/2:65), SD 7.6a¹⁹

1.2.3.3 Here, “**what one intends**” (*ceteti*) and “**what one plans**” (*pakappeti*) refers to volitional formations (*saṅkhāra*), the 2nd factor of the dependent arising formula.²⁰ “**One has latent tendency**” or “**what lies latent**” (*anuseti*) refer to the latent tendencies (*anusaya*), primarily those of ignorance and craving, that is, the 1st and the 8th factors in the dependent arising formula.

When we die with the latent tendencies of ignorance and of craving still intact, our intentions and plans—the concrete manifestations of craving in the form of volitional formations (*saṅkhāra*)—become the basis for consciousness and continue on, become established on a fresh “name-and-form” (*nāma,-rūpa*), and brings on a new existence (rebirth). This is the event of birth, followed by decay-and-death, and other types of suffering between birth and death.²¹

1.2.4 Mental influx

1.2.4.1 Existentially, ignorance is the last of the 3 or 4 influxes (*āsava*)—those of sensual desires (*kām’āsava*), (2) existence (*bhav’āsava*), [3] views (*diṭṭh’āsava*) and (4) ignorance (*avijjāsava*).²² Here, they have been collated with the 4 aspects of **ignorance**, which are the *theoretical* aspects of wisdom. “Ignorance” as an influx has a broader sense, encompassing both its *theoretical* and the practical aspects (that is, including not knowing *how* to end suffering). [1.2.4.3]

1.2.4.2 The influxes or “mental influxes” (*āsava*) are so called because they are powerful karmic currents or “formations” (*saṅkhārā*) that flow from “outside” (that is, the sense-objects) through our 6 sense-bases—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and *mind*—into our *mind*. Note that “mind” is mentioned twice.

The first mind refers to the activities of our **consciousness** (*viññāṇa*) or “conscious” mind, that is, *citta*. This can also be called, in modern lingo, the “cognitive mind,” since it deals with how we “know” or cognize the world, or rather “create” our own world.²³ The other 5 physical faculties are also *cognitive* senses,

¹⁶ *No ce bhikkhave ceteti no ce pakappeti atha ce anuseti, ārammaṇam etaṃ hoti viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā.*

¹⁷ “**But if one still has latent tendency**” (*atha ce anuseti*); here “latent tendency” is countless collective n: the latent tendencies are included because they have not been abandoned here in the resultants of the three planes, in the limited functional states (the five-door adverting and mind-door adverting cittas), and in form. As long as the latent tendencies exist, they become a condition for the karmic consciousness; for there is no way to prevent its arising. See Intro (2) for more details.

¹⁸ Comy says that this section refers to the moment when there is occurrence of volition of the 3 planes, and no occurrence of mental fabrications of craving and views (SA 2:71). See Intro (3) above for detailed nn.

¹⁹ On ignorance as a latent tendency, see **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 (8).

²⁰ See **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16. On formations, see **Saṅkhāra**, SD 17.6.

²¹ See SD 31.3 (1.4).

²² The older set of influxes is threefold, ie, those of: (1) sensual lust, (2) existence and (3) ignorance. See SD 30.3 (1.3.2); **D 33**,1.10(20)/3:216; **M 2**,99.3 (SD 8.10); **M 9**,70/1:55 (SD 11.14); **M 121**,12/3:108 (SD 11.3); **A 3.58**,5/1:165 (SD 94.5), **A 3.59**,4/1:167 (SD 80.16), **A 6.63**,9/3:414 (SD 6.11).

²³ SD 40a.10 (2.2.6.3; 82.4).

which together with the *cognitive* mind, fuel the second mind, the “existential mind,” that is, the **subconscious** or *bhav’āṅga*, the life-continuum.²⁴

1.2.4.3 By way of summary, then, **ignorance** means “not knowing or not understanding.” There are 4 aspects or effects of this *not-knowing*, and they are related to **the 4 “influxes”** (*āsava*), thus:²⁵

influxes (*āsava*)

- | | | |
|---|---------------|---------------|
| (1) We do <i>not</i> know <u>what</u> needs to be known for our happiness and wisdom: | views | <i>ditṭhi</i> |
| (2) We do <i>not</i> know <u>why</u> we lack such knowledge: | sense-desires | <i>kāma</i> |
| (3) We do <i>not</i> know that it is <u>possible</u> for us to gain such knowledge: | existence | <i>bhava</i> |
| (4) We do <i>not</i> know <u>how</u> to properly proceed in life: | ignorance | <i>avijjā</i> |

1.2.5 The mental fetters

1.2.5.1 On the deepest level, ignorance is the last of **the 10 fetters** (*dasa saṃyojana*). The 1st 5 fetters—self-identity view, spiritual doubt, attachment to rituals and vows, sensual lust and repulsion²⁶—are called **the “lower fetters”** (*orāma, bhāgiya saṃyojana*). They are so called because they hold us back in the sense-world of body and mind (the “body” here refers to the 5 physical senses).

1.2.5.2 The “**higher fetters**” (*uddham, bhāgiya saṃyojana*) are the lust for form-existence (non-physical realm, mostly based on light), lust for formless existence (non-physical existence based on pure energy), conceit, restlessness and ignorance.²⁷ While the first 2 of these higher fetters imprison us to “becoming” or existence (*bhava*), the last 3 fetter us to repeating this existence as “rebirth” (*punabbhava*). Of these fetters, ignorance is the last, overcome only by the arhat, on his awakening.

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(Sacca) Avijjā Sutta

The (Truth) Discourse on Ignorance

S 56.17

1 Then, a certain monk approached the Blessed One, saluted him and sat down at one side. Sitting at one side, the monk said to the Blessed One:

²⁴ See SD 17.8a (6.1); SD 32.1 (3.8); SD 48.1 (9.2.1.3).

²⁵ On ignorance as an **influx** (*āsava*), see SD 53.15 (3).

²⁶ In Pali, these are respectively: *sakkāya, ditṭhi, vicikicchā, sīla-b, bata.parāmāsa, kāma, raga* and *paṭigha* (or *vyāpāda*): see SD 50.12 (2.2.2)..

²⁷ These 5 higher fetters, in Pali, are respectively: *rūpa, raga, arūpa, raga, māna, uddhacca* and *avijjā*. See SD 50.12 (2.2.2).

2 “**Ignorance**, ignorance! (*avijjā*),’ bhante, it is said. What, indeed, bhante, is **ignorance**? In what way is one overwhelmed in ignorance?”²⁸

3 “Bhikshus,
not knowing suffering,
not knowing the arising of suffering,
not knowing the ending of suffering,
not knowing the path leading to the ending of suffering—

*dukkhe aññāṇaṃ
dukkha,samudaye aññāṇaṃ
dukkha,nirodhe aññāṇaṃ
dukkha,nirodha,gāminiyā
paṭipadāya aññāṇaṃ*

4 this, bhikshus, is called **ignorance**,
and in that way, one is overwhelmed by ignorance.²⁹

5 Therefore, bhikshus,
You should devote yourself (to the reflection):³⁰ “This is suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the arising of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the ending of suffering.”
You should devote yourself (to the reflection): “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.”

— evaṃ —

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²⁸ *Avijjā avijjā’ti bhante vuccati, katamā nu kho bhante avijjā? Kittāvatā ca avijjā,gato hotīti?* The suffix *-gata*, “gone (to)” (past part of *gacchati*, “he goes”) has a contextual sense; here, meaning “overwhelmed by (ignorance)”: cf its usage at (**Sacca**) **Vijjā S** (S 56.18,2)+n, SD 53.31. See §4 n.

²⁹ *Ettāvatā ca avijjā,gato hoti*. This phrase replies to *Kittāvatā ca avijjā,gato hoti* [§1]; alt trs: *kittāvata*, “to what extent?” and *ettāvat,ā* “to that extent.”

³⁰ *Idaṃ dukkhan’ti yogo karaṇīyo*.